Information Brief

Bullying and Harassment

Our schools must create caring, respectful, and encouraging communities in order to provide safe supportive environments where learning flourishes. Improvement efforts should include attention to each school's culture, the quality of interpersonal relationships (student to staff, staff to student, staff to staff, and student to student), and the nature and quality of learning experiences. Bullying prevention should be a school-wide effort designed to send a message that bullying will not be accepted in the school. An environment of genuine concern and acceptance of all individuals, free of stereotyping, where high levels of learning occur characterizes caring, encouraging school climates.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS ADDRESSED: *Students in our school have positive relationships with their peers; show concern and caring for others; treat others with dignity and respect regardless of their individual differences. Our school is a caring, respectful, encouraging community.*

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, bullying and harassment in schools cause problems that can negatively impact general school climate and the right of students to learn in a safe environment. Lifelong negative consequences may occur, both for the perpetrator of bullying and harassment and for the targets of this behavior.

The key component of bullying is physical or psychological intimidation that occurs repeatedly over time to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse. It is characterized by an imbalance of power. Bullying consists of **direct behaviors,** such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting, or stealing, that are initiated by one or more students against a target or targets, and **indirect behaviors,** such as spreading rumors, that cause targets to be socially isolated through intentional exclusion.

Harassment in school occurs when a student or adult's behavior or language creates a hostile, offensive or intimidating school environment.

Bullying and harassment may be the impetus of other behaviors that disrupt the school environment. The common thread among all recent school shooters was that they all had been targets of bullying and harassment. During the Fall of 2000, a study by the National Threat Assessment Center, run by the U.S. Secret Service, found that in more than two-thirds of 37 school shootings, the attackers felt "persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked or injured" (Bowles, *USA Today*, 4-17-2001). Harassment and bullying can lead to suicide, one of the highest causes of death among adolescents.

> **"Being bullied is not just an unpleasant rite of passage through childhood, it's a public health problem that merits attention."**
> *- Duane Alexander, Director, Child Health Institute*

How prevalent is bullying and harassment and how does it impact the school environment?

Bullying traditionally has been accepted as some perverse sort of child's play and a part of the growing-up process. Today, bullying is rightfully recognized for what it is — an abusive behavior that often leads to greater and prolonged violent behavior or depression.

Research funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (1998), found that about 30 percent of kids in grades six through 10 reported being involved in bullying (13 percent as the bully, 11 percent as targets of bullying and six percent as both) (Olweus, 1993). More than 160,000 students skip school every day because they fear bullies, according to the National Association of School Psychologists (Bowles, *USA Today*, 4-17-2001). Direct bullying seems to increase through the elementary school years, peak in the middle school years and decline during the high school years. However, indirect bullying and harassment by way of verbal abuse appears to remain constant through high school.

The following behaviors may create a hostile, offensive or intimidating school environment:
- Degrading, demeaning or insulting verbal statements or writings related to a student's race, religion, ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation or disability.
- Graffiti, slogans or other displays, which contain racial, ethnic, religious slurs, or insults based on another student's gender, sexual orientation or disability.
- Treatment of a student in an unfavorable way because the student submitted to or rejected sexual advances or requests for a social relationship.

Although boys who bully typically engage in direct bullying methods, girls who bully are more apt to use subtle, indirect strategies. Boys tend to be more likely than girls to engage in and be targets of bullying.

Who are the players?
Three types of students are the players in the practice of bullying and harassment: the **bully** is the instigator of the behavior, the **target** acts as a host for the aggressive behavior, and the **witness** takes on the role of mediator, whether actively taking part in the confrontation or passively standing aside.

The Bully
Though many students who engage in bullying have a need to feel powerful and in control, there is little evidence to support the contention that bullies victimize others because they feel bad about themselves. Bullies usually have little empathy for the targets of their actions. Bullies typically are larger than their victims and have more positive attitudes about violence than their peers.

The Target
Targets of bullying can be insecure and cautious and suffer from low self-esteem; rarely defending themselves or retaliating when confronted by bullying students. They may lack the social skills to develop lasting friendships and are often socially isolated. Parents of the targets often are overprotective (Batsche and Knoff, 1994, Olweus, 1993). Targets of bullying report feelings of vengefulness, anger and self-pity after a bullying incident (Borg, 1998).

A strong correlation exists between bullying other students during the school year and engaging in criminal behavior as adults. Chronic bullies seem to continue their behaviors into adulthood, negatively influencing their ability to develop and maintain positive relationships (Limber, Nation, Juvenile Justice Bulletin, April 1998).

Targets of bullying often fear school and consider it to be an unsafe and unhappy place. Being the target of bullying increases the student's isolation, because peers do not want to lose social status by associating with them or because their peers don't want to increase the risks of being bullied themselves. Depression and low self-esteem can continue for the target into adulthood (Olweus, 1993, Batsche and Knoff, 1994).

The Witness:
Most students in a school setting are neither the bully nor the target. They are bystanders who can add momentum to the bullying by way of their own passive behavior. If witnesses do nothing to prevent or put an end to the bullying, they are giving the bully more power to continue inappropriate behaviors. The witness to bullying and harassment can provide support to the bully without actively taking a part in the bullying. But the group of students who witness bullying can become active in developing a school climate that does not accept the bully's behavior.

"You can outnumber the bullies if you teach the silent majority to stand up," states Carla Garrity, Denver psychologist and bullying expert. In one Canadian study, 76 percent of the students believed that they should help the target of bullying, or actively try to intervene in the situation (Charach, Pepler and Ziegler, 1995). The first step is to allow and encourage this group to stand against bullying by teaching them that they can make a difference simply by the way they react when they witness bullying in their school.

What can be done about bullying and harassment?
Services, Strategies and Suggested Training: Create a school culture that focuses on the quality of interpersonal relationships (student to staff, staff to student, staff to staff and student to student) where there is genuine concern, caring and acceptance of all individuals, regardless of their individual differences.
- Post school-wide rules against bullying, accompanied by consistent sanctions.
- Help witnesses develop behaviors that do not encourage bullying, and actually help to put an end to school environments that support bullying. Ask witnesses to refuse to join in or watch the bullying, to speak out to the bully, to report bullying they see, to invite the target of bullying into their group and make an effort to include students who may normally feel left out or rejected.
- Provide student and adult mentors who assist in building self-esteem and foster mutual understanding of differences in others.
- Recruit parents, encouraging them to take part in the educational process.
- Provide classes for parents in parenting skills and for students in anger management.
- Develop behavior contracts and written behavior codes for students, teachers, staff and parents.
- Use discipline that encourages right behavior instead of issuing reprimands that punish wrong behavior.
- Organize friendship groups that support regularly victimized students and peer mediation programs that train students to work problems out among themselves.
- Monitor "hot spots" closely where bullying is likely to occur, e.g., the cafeteria and playground.

SUMMARY
When practical intervention plans are in place, it is possible to reduce bullying dramatically in the school environment. Intervention is primarily a question of changing attitudes, behavior, and routines in the school setting.

LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:
- **Web sites:**
  - Bully On Line: http://www.successunlimited.co.uk/
  - Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence: http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/factsheets
- **In this Handbook:** See "*Success4* Critical Elements," and other articles in this section on *Character Education*, *Conflict Resolution*, *Violation Prevention*, and *School-wide Discipline*.